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TAGS: [CM](#) [ECON](#) [KCOR](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#)
SUBJECT: CAMEROON'S NORTHWEST PROVINCE: NEGLECTED SEAT OF
THE OPPOSITION

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During Ambassador's first trip to the Northwest Province on May 11-15, local contacts expressed frustration with the region's poor infrastructure and lack of economic development. This Anglophone region feels marginalized by Yaounde, in part because it is the stronghold of the main opposition SDF party. SDF Chairman John Fru Ndi told Ambassador he was discouraged by the current political situation, which reflected deeply felt frustration, and was skeptical about the soon-to-be-created Electoral Commission (ELECAM). He urged USG assistance in repatriating proceeds of corruption. In addition to SDF leaders, Ambassador met with the Governor and other senior officials, NGO representatives, businessmen, religious leaders, traditional authorities, and local media. End summary.

A Province Neglected

¶2. (U) What is now the Northwest region joined Cameroon in 1961 under a federal structure following a UN referendum, and became a province after unification in 1972. Blessed with beautiful mountains and known for its distinct culture, this Anglophone region of 1.5 million people suffers from weak infrastructure (roads, water, electricity) and poverty resulting from a lack of government investment. Agriculture and animal husbandry are the mainstays of the local economy, with virtually no industry and little formal employment.

¶3. (SBU) Northwesterners feel their poverty reflects government neglect (some would say punishment) because of the province's separate status prior to unification and lingering separatist sentiments, its role as the seat of the main opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) party, and its language. As signs of neglect, locals point to the region's abysmal roads, poor public services, and government decisions which are seen as favoring Francophone regions. For example, northwesterners are frustrated that the government favors building a deep sea port in Kribi (Francophone South Province) rather than Limbe (Anglophone Southwest province). They also saw as vindictive the regime's recent highly publicized arrest on corruption charges of prominent northwesterner Zaccharias Forjindam, former head of the Cameroon Shipyard.

Sporadic Conflicts

¶4. (U) The Northwest suffers from persistent conflicts between herders and farmers over land and resources. A dispute between the Bali and Bawak tribes led to an attack by the Balis in 2007 which destroyed hundreds of homes and displaced an estimated 2,000 people in the Bawak community (compensation claims are reportedly still in the courts and the government plans to demarcate the disputed territory). There is also a lingering conflict in the town of Sabga over

the succession of the local leader (Lamido); the community supports one claimant, while the regional government supports another. The Prime Minister sent a team to the region to investigate but the conflict remains unresolved.

15. (SBU) Regional officials acknowledged that there was significant violence in Bamenda, Kumbo and several other locations in the region during the February civil unrest, but they argued that the violence was never widespread and tensions have now subsided. The Government Delegate (Mayor equivalent) of Bamenda lamented that the February riots damaged the city's garbage collection equipment and as a result garbage was not collected for two weeks. Archbishop of Bamenda Cornelius Fontem Esua told Ambassador he was not surprised by the riots given the depth of discontent felt by average people.

SDF Leader Fru Ndi Low Key and Skeptical

16. (C) In a lunch at his residence, SDF Chairman John Fru Ndi lamented Cameroon's "bleak future" which has the potential to be "worse than Rwanda". He saw significant tension between north and south and among ethnic groups, describing the current situation as an "uncertain calm," which could quickly degenerate into another violent outbreak. He believed the February riots reflected deep-seated frustrations linked to high unemployment and economic malaise, corruption, and lack of democratic space. He lamented that President Biya had yet to agree to meet with him and rarely travels within the country (Biya has reportedly only visited Bamenda once in 25 years).

17. (C) Fru Ndi refuted government allegations that the February riots were orchestrated by the SDF, conceding that he is not powerful enough to have organized them. Attempts to blame the SDF and Bamenda politicians had embittered northwesterners, who had suffered during the events, he said, noting that police fired 500 rounds of ammunition into his housing compound during the civil unrest, killing a boy. Fru Ndi thought many were too afraid to respond to his call for a national day of mourning following the April passage of a constitutional amendment eliminating presidential term limits.

18. (C) Fru Ndi hoped the USG could help repatriate the proceeds of corruption located in the United States. Ambassador explained our legal procedures for requesting assistance in identifying such funds, noting our strict privacy laws. Such privacy laws "hurt Cameroon," Fru Ndi responded, saying that the U.S. needs to do more to recuperate these funds "to prevent the situation from becoming a war." Biya was willing to use excessive force to protect networks of corruption, Fru Ndi added.

19. (C) The SDF Chairman was skeptical of the Electoral Commission (ELECAM), which is due to be created by the end of June, 2008. He feared that elections could still be manipulated, especially in the absence of an updated census, and that the government had too much control over ELECAM leadership. If there were a transparent election process, he was convinced voters would register en masse however, to function effectively, ELECAM needed financial independence and revised legislation. Fru Ndi expects presidential elections earlier than the scheduled date of 2011 and said would run again if the party chooses him.

Comment

110. (C) Soon after the Ambassador's visit, the SDF marked its eighteenth anniversary with little fanfare and amidst commentary in much of the media that the SDF lacked relevant leadership, vision, or internal democracy. In our meeting, Fru Ndi seemed tired and low key, with few ideas for moving his party or the country forward. He and his colleagues used a backdrop of the U.S. presidential race to make points about SDF leadership: Fru Ndi favored Senator Hillary Clinton's

candidacy because of what he saw as her greater experience, while his staff voiced support for Senator Barak Obama because of what they saw as his energy and new ideas. Our discouraging lunch with Cameroon's main opposition leader mirrored the general feeling of a province standing still, with the potential represented by its physical beauty, rich agriculture and strong cultural traditions undermined by the reality of its garbage-strewn, potholed city streets and dejected population.

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